

A Hero at the Gates

Tanith Lee

*Heroic fantasy hasn't entirely been the domain of male writers. Back in the 1930s Catherine L. Moore produced a wonderfully innovative series featuring the warrior woman, Jirel of Joiry, and later Leigh Brackett and Marion Zimmer Bradley virtually cornered the market in planetary romances. Tanith Lee (b. 1947) writes material in the entire range of fantasy fiction, and she is almost impossible to define. She began with books for children, such as *The Dragon Hoard* (1971) and *Animal Castle* (1972). Her first adult book, *The Birthgrave* (1975), about a woman searching for her true name, blended the fields of sword-and-sorcery and planetary romance. The *Flat Earth* series, which began with *Night's Master* (1978), mixes the oriental and the exotic in almost Dunsanian tradition. The collection *Red as Blood* (1983) reworks well-known fairy tales in darker mode while *Sung in Shadow* (1983) takes us back to a Shakespearean Renaissance Italy. And there's a lot more. The following comes from Lee's collection *Cyrion* (1982) about a wandering hero who is not quite as traditional as he might at first seem.*

The city lay in the midst of the desert.

At the onset it could resemble a mirage; next, one of the giant mesas that were the teeth of the desert, filmy blue with distance and heat. But Cyrion had found the road which led to the city, and taking the road, presently the outline of the place came clear. High walls and higher towers within, high gates of hammered bronze. And above, the high and naked desert sky, that reflected back from its sounding-bowl no sound at all from the city, and no smoke.

Cyrion stood and regarded the city. He was tempted to believe it a desert too, one of those hulks of men's making, abandoned centuries ago as the sands of the waste crept to their threshold. Certainly, the city was old. Yet it had no aspect of neglect, none of the indefinable melancholy of the un-lived-in house.

Intuitively, Cyrion knew that as he stood regarding the city from without, so others stood noiselessly within, regarding Cyrion.

What did they perceive? This: a young man, tall and deceptively slim, deceptively elegant, which elegance itself was something of a surprise, for he had been months travelling in the desert, on the caravan routes and the rare and sand-blown roads. He wore the loose dark clothing of a nomad, but with the generous hood thrust back to show he did not have a nomad's pigmentation. At his side a sword was sheathed in red leather. The sunlight struck a silver-gold burnish on the pommel of the sword that was also the colour of his hair. His left hand was mailed in rings which apparently no bandit had been able to relieve him of. If the watchers in the city had remarked that Cyrion was as handsome as the Arch-Demon himself, they would not have been the first to do so.

Then there came the booming scraping thunder of two bronze gates unbarred and dragged inward on their runners. The way into the city was exposed - yet blocked now by a crowd. Silent they were, and clad in black, the men and the women; even the children. And their faces were all the same, and gazed at Cyrion in the same way. They gazed at him as if he were the last bright day of their lives, the last bright coin in the otherwise empty coffer.

The sense of his dynamic importance to them was so strong that Cyrion swept the crowd a low, half-mocking bow. As he swept the bow, from his keen eyes' corner, Cyrion saw a man walk through the crowd and come out of the gate.

The man was as tall as Cyrion. He had a hard face, tanned but sallow, wings of black hair beneath a shaved crown, and a collar of swarthy gold set with gems. But his gaze also clung on Cyrion. It was like a lover's look. Or the starving lion's as it beholds the deer.

"Sir," said the black-haired man, "what brings you to this, our city?"

Cyrion gestured lazily with the ringed left hand. "The nomads have a saying: 'After a month in the desert, even a dead tree is an object of wonder.'"

"Only curiosity, then," said the man.

"Curiosity; hunger; thirst; loneliness; exhaustion," enlarged Cyrion. By looking at Cyrion, few would think him affected by any of these things.

"Food we will give you, drink and rest. Our story we may not give. To satisfy the curious is not our fate. Our fate is darker and more savage. We await a saviour. We await him in bondage."

"When is he due?" Cyrion enquired.

"You, perhaps, are he."

"Am I? You flatter me. I have been called many things, never saviour."

"Sir," said the black-haired man, "do not jest at the wretched trouble of this city, nor at its solitary hope."

"No jest," said Cyrion, "but I hazard you wish some service of me. Saviours are required to labour, I believe, in behalf of their people. What do you want? Let us get it straight."

"Sir," said the man, "I am Memled, prince of this city."

"Prince, but not saviour?" interjected Cyrion, his eyes widening with the most insulting astonishment.

Memled lowered his gaze. "If you seek to shame me with that, it is your right. But you should know, I am prevented by circumstance."

"Oh, indeed. Naturally."

"I bear your gibe without complaint. I ask again if you will act for the city."

"And I ask you again what I must do."

Memled raised his lids and directed his glance at Cyrion once more. "We are in the thrall of a monster, a demon-beast. It dwells in the caverns beneath the city, but at night it roves at will. It demands the flesh of our men to eat; it drinks the blood of our women and our children. It is protected through ancient magic, by a pact made a hundred years before between the princes of the city (cursed be they!) and the hordes of the Fiend. None born of the city has power to slay the beast. Yet there is a prophecy. A stranger, a hero who ventures to our gates, will have the power."

"And how many heroes," said Cyrion gently, "have you persuaded to an early death with this enterprise, you and your demon-beast?"

"I will not lie to you. Upward of a score. If you turn aside, no one here will speak ill of you. Your prospects of success would be slight, should you set your wits and sword against the beast. And our misery is nothing to you."

Cyrion ran his eyes over the black-clad crowd. The arid faces were all still fixed towards his. The children, like miniature adults, just as arid, immobile, noiseless. If the tale were true, they had learned the lessons of fear and sorrow early, nor would they live long to enjoy their lessoning.

"Other than its dietary habits," Cyrion said, "what can you tell me of your beast?"

Memled shivered. His sallowness increased. "I can reveal no more. It is a part of the foul sorcery that binds us. We may say nothing to aid you, do nothing to aid you. Only pray for you, if you should decide to pit your skill against the devil."

Cyrion smiled. "You have a cool effrontery, my friend, that is altogether delightful. Inform me then merely of this. If I conquer your beast, what reward is there - other, of course, than the blessing of your people?"

"We have our gold, our silver, our jewels. You may take them all away with you, or whatever you desire. We crave safety, not wealth. Our wealth has not protected us from horror and death."

"I think we have a bargain," said Cyrion. He looked at the children again. "Providing the treasury tallies

with your description."

* * *

It was noon, and the desert sun poured its merciless light upon the city. Cyrion walked in the company of Prince Memled and his guard - similarly black-clad men, but with weighty blades and daggers at their belts, none, presumably, ever stained by beast-blood. The crowd moved circumspectly in the wake of their prince. Only the rustle of feet shuffling the dust was audible, and no speech. Below the bars of overhanging windows, here and there, a bird cage had been set out in the violet shade. The birds in the cages did not sing.

They reached a market-place, sun-bleached, unpeopled and without merchandise of any sort. A well at the market's centre proclaimed the water which would, in the first instance, have caused the building of a city here. Further evidence of water lay across from the market, where a broad stairway, flanked by stone columns, led to a massive battlemented wall and doors of bronze this time plated by pure flashing gold. Over the wall-top, the royal house showed its peaks and pinnacles, and the heads of palm trees. There was a green perfume in the air, heady as incense in the desert.

The crowd faltered in the market-place. Memled, and his guard conducted Cyrion up the stairway. The gold-plated doors were opened. They entered a cool palace, blue as an under-sea cave, buzzing with slender fountains, sweet with the scent of sun-scorched flowers.

Black-garmented servants brought chilled wine. The food was poor and did not match the wine. Had the flocks and herds gone to appease the demon-beast? Cyrion had spied not a goat nor a sheep in the city. For that matter, not a dog, nor even the sleek lemon cats and striped marmosets rich women liked to nurse instead of babies.

After the food and drink, Memled, near wordless yet courteous, led Cyrion to a treasury where wealth lay as thick as dust, and spilling on the ground.

"I would have thought," said Cyrion, fastidiously investigating ropes of pearls and chains of rubies, "such stuff might have bought you a hero, had you sent for one."

"This, too, is our limitation. We may not send. He must come to us, by accident."

"As the nomads say," said Cyrion, charmingly, innocently, " 'No man knows the wall better than he who built it.'"

At that instant, something thundered in the guts of the world.

It was a fearful bellowing cacophony. It sounded hot with violence and the lust for carnage. It was like a bull, or a pen of bulls, with throats of brass and sinews of molten iron, roaring in concert underground.

The floor shook a little. A sapphire tumbled from its heap and fell upon another heap below.

Cyrion seemed interested rather than disturbed.

Certainly, there was nothing more than interest in his voice as he asked Prince Memled: "Can that be your beast, contemplating tonight's dinner?"

Memled's face took on an expression of the most absolute anguish and despair. His mouth writhed. He uttered a sudden sharp cry, as if a dreaded, well-remembered pain had seized him. He shut his eyes.

Intrigued, Cyrion observed: "It is fact then, you cannot speak of it? Calm yourself, my friend. It speaks very ably for itself."

Memled covered his face with his hands, and turned away.

Cyrion walked out through the door. Presently, pallid, but sufficiently composed, Memled followed his hero-guest. Black guards closed the treasury.

"Now," said Cyrion, "since I cannot confront your beast until it emerges from its caverns by night, I propose to sleep. My journey through the desert has been arduous, and, I am sure you agree, freshness in combat is essential."

"Sir," said Memled, "the palace is at your disposal. But, while you sleep, I and some others shall remain at your side."

Smiling, Cyrion assured him, "Indeed, my friend, you and they will not."

"Sir, it is best you are not left alone. Forgive my insistence."

"What danger is there? The beast is no threat till the sun goes down. There are some hours yet."

Memled seemed troubled. He spread his hand, indicating the city beyond the palace walls. "You are a hero, sir. Certain of the people may bribe the guard. They may enter the palace and disrupt your rest with questions and clamour."

"It seemed to me," said Cyrion, "your people are uncommonly quiet. But if not, they are welcome. I sleep deeply. I doubt if anything would wake me till sunset, when I trust you. Prince, or another, will do so."

Memled's face, such an index of moods, momentarily softened with relief. "That deeply do you sleep? Then I will agree to let you sleep alone. Unless, perhaps a girl might be sent to you?"

"You are too kind. However, I decline the girl. I prefer to select my own ladies, after a fight rather than before."

Memled smiled his own stiff and rusty smile. Behind his eyes, sluggish currents of self-dislike, guilt and shame stirred cloudily.

The doors were shut on the sumptuous chamber intended for Cyrion's repose. Aromatics burned in silver bowls. The piercing afternoon sun was excluded behind shutters of painted wood and embroidered draperies. Beyond the shut doors, musicians made sensuous low music on pipes, drums and ghirzas. All was conducive to slumber. Though not to Cyrian's.

In contrast to his words, he was a light sleeper. In the city of the beast, he had no inclination to sleep at all. Privacy was another case. Having secured the chamber doors on the inside, he prowled soundlessly, measuring the room for its possibilities. He prised open a shutter, and scanned across the blistering roofs of the palace into the dry green palm shade of the gardens.

All about, the city kept its tongueless vigil. Cyrion thoughtfully felt of its tension. It was like a great single heart, poised between one beat and the next. A single heart, or two jaws about to snap together—

"Cyrion," said a voice urgently.

To see him spin about was to discover something of the nature of Cyrion. A nonchalant idler at the window one second, a coiled spring let fly the split second after. The sword was ready in his bare right hand. He had drawn too fast almost for a man's eye to register. Yet he was not even breathing quickly. And, finding the vacant chamber before him, as he had left it, no atom altered in his stance.

"Cyrion.," cried the voice again, out of nothing and nowhere. "I pray heaven you had the cunning to lie to them, Cyrion."

Cyrion appeared to relax his exquisite vigilance. He had not.

"Heaven, no doubt, enjoys your prayers," he said. "And am I to enjoy the sight of you?"

The voice was female, expressive and very beautiful.

"I am in a prison," said the voice. There was the smallest catch in it, swiftly mastered. "I speak to warn you. Do not credit them, Cyrion."

Cyrion began to move about the room. Casually and delicately he lifted aside the draperies with his sword.

"They offered me a girl," he said reflectively.

"But they did not offer you certain death."

Cyrion had completed his circuit of the room. He looked amused and entertained.

He knelt swiftly, then stretched himself flat. A circular piece was missing in the mosaic pattern of the floor. He set one acute eye there and looked through into a dim area, lit by one murky source of light beyond his view. Directly below, a girl lay prone on the darkness which must itself be a floor, staring up at him from luminous wild eyes. In the half-glow she was more like a bloom of light herself than a reality; a trembling crystalline whiteness on the air, hair like the gold chains in the treasury, a face like that of a carved goddess, the body of a beautiful harlot before she gets in the trade - still virgin - and at her waist, her wrists, her ankles, drawn taut to pegs in the ground, iron chains.

"So there you are."

"It is a device of the stonework that enabled you to hear me and I you. In former days, princes would sit in your room above, drinking and making love, listening to the cries of those being tortured in this dungeon, and sometimes they would peer through to increase their pleasure. But either Memled has forgotten, or he thought me past crying out. I glimpsed your shadow pass over the aperture. Earlier, the jailor spoke your name to me. Oh, Cyrion, I am to die, and you with me."

She stopped, and tears ran like drops of silver from her wild eyes.

"You have a captive audience, lady," said Cyrion. "It is this way," she whispered. "The beast they have pre-tended to seek rescue from is, in fact, the familiar demon of the city. They love the brute, and commit all forms of beastliness in its name. How else do you suppose they have amassed such stores of treasure, here in the wilderness? And once a year they honour the beast by giving to it a beautiful maiden and a notable warrior. I was to have been the bride of a rich and wise lord in a city by the sea. But I am thought beautiful; Memled heard of me. Men of this city attacked the caravan in which I rode, and carried me here, to this, where I have lingered a month. You arrived by unlucky destiny, unless some of Memled's sorcery enticed you here, unknowingly. Tonight., we shall share each other's fate."

"You are their prisoner, I am not. How do they plan to reconcile me to sacrifice?"

"That is but too simple. At dusk a hundred men will come. You do not seem afraid, but even fearless, before a hundred men you cannot prevail. They will take your sword, stun you, bind you. There is a trick door in the western wall that gives on a stairway. Through the door and down the stair they will thrust you. Below are the caverns where the beast roams, bellowing for blood. I too must pass that way to death."

"A fascinating tale," said Cyrion, "What prompts you to tell it me?"

"Are you not a hero?" the girl demanded passionately. "Have you not promised to slay the beast for them, to be their saviour, though admittedly in return for gold. Can you not instead be your own saviour, and mine?"

"Forgive me, lady," said Cyrion, in a tone verging subtly on naivete, "I am at a loss. Besides, our dooms seem written with a firm hand. Perhaps we should accept them."

Cyrion rose from the mosaic. On his feet he halted, just aside from the hole.

After a moment, the girl screamed: "You are a coward, Cyrion. For all your looks and your fine sword, for all your nomad's garments, the wear of those they name the Lions of the Desert -for all that - *coward* and *fool*."

Cyrion seemed to be considering.

After a minute, he said amiably: "I suppose I might open the trick door now, and seek the monster of my own volition, sword in hand and ready. Then, if I slay him, I might return for you, and free you."

The girl wept. Through her tears she said, with a knife for a voice: "If you are a *man*, you will do it."

"Oh no, lady. Only if I am your notion of a man."

The stair was narrow, and by design lightlessly invisible - save that Cyrion had filched one of the scented tapers from the room above to give him eyes. The trick door had been easy to discover, an ornamental knob that turned, a slab that slid. Thirty steps down, he passed another kind of door, of iron, on his right. Faintly, beyond the door, he heard a girl weeping.

The stair descended through the western wall of the palace, and proceeded underground. Deep in the belly of the caverns that sprawled, as yet unseen, at the end of the stair, no ominous rumour was manifested. At length, the stair reached bottom, and ceased. Ahead stretched impenetrable black, and from the black an equally black and featureless silence.

Cyrion advanced, the taper held before him. The dark toyed with the taper, surrendering a miniature oasis of half-seen things, such as trunks of rock soaring up towards the ceiling. The dark mouthed Cyrion. It licked him, rolled him around on its tongue. The lit taper was just a garnish to its palate; it liked the light with Cyrion, as a man might like salt with his meat.

Then there came a huge wind from out of the nothing ahead. A metallic heated blast, as if from a furnace. Cyrion stopped, pondering. The beast, closeted in the caverns, had sighed? An instant after, it roared.

Above, in the treasury, the roaring had seemed to stagger the foundations of the house. Here, it peeled

even the darkness, and dissected it like a fruit. The broken pieces of the dark rattled on the trunks of rock. Shards erupted from the rock and rained to the ground. The caverns thrummed, murmured, fell dumb. The dark did not re-congeal.

There was a new light. A flawless round of light, pale, smoky red. Then it blinked. Then there were two. Two flawless rounds of simmering raw rose. Two eyes. Cyrion dropped the taper and put his heel on it.

This beast you witnessed by its own illumination. It swelled from the black as the eyes brightened with its interest. It was like no other beast; you could liken it to nothing else. It was like itself, unique. Only its size was comparable to anything. To a tower, a wall - one eye alone, that rosy window, could have fit tall Cyrion in its socket.

So radiant now, those eyes, the whole cavern was displayed, the mounting rocks, the floor piled with dusts, the dust curtains floating in the air. From the dust, the beast lifted itself. It gaped its mouth. Cyrion ducked, and the blast of burning though non-incendiary breath rushed over his head. It was not fetid breath, simply very hot. Cyrion planted his sword point down in the dust, and indolently leaned on it. He looked like a marvellous statue. For someone who could move like lightning, he had chosen now to become stone, and the pink fires settled on his pale hair, staining it the colour of diluted wine.

In this fashion Cyrion watched the demon-beast, by the light of its vast eyes, slink towards him. He watched, motionless, leaning on his sword.

Then a sinewy taloned forefoot, lengthy as a column, struck at him, and Cyrion was no longer in that spot, motionless, leaning on his sword, as he had been an instant before. Away in the shadow, Cyrion stood again unmoving, sword poised, negligently waiting. Again, the batting of scythe-fringed death; again missing him.

The jaws clashed, and slaver exploded forth, like a waterfall. Cyrion was gone, out of reach. Stone had returned to lightning. The fourth blow was his. He neither laughed at the seriousness of his mission nor frowned. No meditation was needed, the target no challenge, facile...

Cyrion swung back his arm, and sent the sword plummeting, like a straight white rent through the cavern. It met the beast's left eye, shattered it like pink glass, plunged to the brain.

Like a cat, Cyrion sprang to a ledge and crouched there.

Black ichor spouted to the cavern's top. Now, once more gradually, the light faded. The thunderous roaring ebbed like a colossal sea withdrawing from these dry caves beneath the desert.

On his ledge, Cyrion waited, pitiless and without triumph, for the beast, in inevitable stages, to fall, to be still, to die.

In the reiterated blackness, blind, but remembering infallibly his way, as he remembered all things, once disclosed, Cyrion went to the demon-beast and plucked out his sword, and returned with it up the pitchy stairway to the iron dungeon door set in the wall.

The iron door was bolted from without. He shot the bolts and pushed open the door.

He paused, just inside the prison, sword in hand, absorbing each detail. A stone box the prison was, described by dull fluttering torches. The girl lay on the floor, pegged and chained as he had regarded her through the peep-hole. He glanced towards the peep-hole, which was barely to be seen against the torch murk.

"Cyrion," the girl murmured, "the beast's black blood is on your sword, and you live."

Her white and lovely face was turned to him, the rich strands of golden hair swept across the floor, her silken breasts quivered to the tumult of her heart. Her tears fell again, but now her eyes were yielding. They showed no amazement or inquisition, only love. He went to her, and, raising his sword a second time, chopped the head from her body.

Thirty steps up, a door crashed wide. Cyrion stooped gracefully, straightened, took the thirty steps in a series of fine-flexed leaps. He stepped through the trick door and was in the upper chamber, the sword yet stark in his bare right hand. And in his left hand, mailed with rings, a woman's head held by its shining hair.

Opposite, in the forced doorway of the chamber, Memled stared with a face like yellow cinders.

Then he collapsed on his knees, and behind him, the guards also dropped down.

Memled began to sob. The sobs were rough, racking him. He plainly could not keep them back, and his whole body shuddered.

Cyrion remained where he was, ignoring his bloody itinerary. Finally Memled spoke.

"After an eternity, heaven has heard our lament, replied to our entreaty. You, the hero of the city, after the eternity, our saviour. But we were bound by the hell-pact, and could neither warn nor advise you. How did you fathom the truth?"

"And what is the truth?" asked Cyrion, with unbelievable sweetness, as he stood between blotched blade and dripping head.

"The truth - that the monster is illusion set to deceive those heroes who would fight for us, set to deceive by the bitch-sorceress whose head you have lopped. Year in and out, she has drained us, roaming by

night, feasting on the flesh and blood of my people, unrelenting and vile she-wolf that she was. And our fragile chance, a prophecy, the solitary weakness in the hell-pact-that only if a heroic traveller should come to the gates and agree to rid us of our torment, might we see her slain. But always she bewitched and duped these heroes, appearing in illusory shackles, lying that we would sacrifice her, sending each man to slay a phantom beast that did not exist save while her whim permitted it. And then the hero would go to her, trustingly, and she would seize him and murder him too. Over a score of champions we sent to their deaths in this manner, because we were bound and could not direct them where the evil lay. And so, again, sir hero, how did you fathom truth in this sink of witchery?"

"Small things," said Cyrion laconically.

"But you will list them for me?" Memled proffered his face, all wet with tears, and brimming now with a feverish joy.

"Her proximity to me, which seemed unlikely if she were what she claimed. Her extreme beauty which had survived a month's imprisonment and terror, and her wrists and ankles which were unchafed by her chains. That, a stranger to this place, she knew so much of its by-ways and its history. More interesting, that she knew so much of me - besides my name, which I did not see why a jailor should have given her - for instance, that I wore a nomad's garment, and that she thought me presentable, though she could not have seen me herself. She claimed she beheld my shadow pass over the peep-hole, but no more. She knew all our bargain, too, yours and mine, as if she had been listening to it. Would you hear more?"

"Every iota of it!"

"Then I will cite the beast, which patently was unreal. So huge a voice it could make the floors tremble, and yet the house was still intact. And the creature itself so untiny it could have shaken the city to flour, but confined in a cavern where it had not even stirred the dust. And then, the absence of bones, and its wholesome breath, meant to impress by volume and heat, and which smelled of nothing else. A cat which chews rats will have a fouler odour. And this thing, which supposedly ate men and drank their blood and was big enough to fill the air with stink, clean as a scoured pot on the stove. Lastly, I came above and saw the peep-hole would show nothing of what went on in this room, let alone a shadow passing. And I noticed too, the lady's sharp teeth, if you like."

Memled got to his feet. Halfway to Cyrion, he checked and turned to the guards.

"Inform the city our terror has ended."

The guards, round-eyed, rushed away.

Memled came to Cyrion, glaring at the head, which Cyrion had prudently set down in a convenient bowl, and which was beginning to crumble to a sort of rank powder.

"We are free of her," Memled cried. "And the treasury is yours to despoil. Take all I have. Take - take this, the royal insignia of the city," and he clutched the collar of swarthy gold at his throat.

"Unnecessary," said Cyrion lightly. He wiped his sword upon a drapery. Memled paid no heed. Cyrion sheathed the sword. Memled smiled, still rusty, but his face vivid with excitement. "The treasury, then," suggested Cyrion.

Cyrion dealt cannily in the treasury. The light of day was gone by now, and by the smooth amber of the lamps, Cyrion chose from among the ropes of jewels and skeins of metal, from the cups and gemmy daggers, the armlets and the armour. Shortly, there was sufficient to weigh down a leather bag, which Cyrion slung upon his back. Memled would have pressed further gifts on him. Cyrion declined.

"As the nomads say," said Cyrion, " 'three donkeys cannot get their heads into the same bucket.' I have enough."

Outside in the city, now ablaze with windows under a sky ablaze with stars, songs and shouting of celebration rose into the cool hollow of the desert night.

"A night without blood and without horror," said Memled.

Cyrion walked down the palace stairway. Memled remained on the stair, his guards scattered loosely about him. In the marketplace a fire burned, and there was dancing. The black clothes were all gone; the women had put on their finery and earrings sparkled and clinked as they danced together. The men drank, eyeing the women.

Near the edge of the group, two children poised like small stones, dressed in their best, and Cyrion saw their faces.

A child's face, incorrigible calendar of the seasons of the soul. Men learn pretence, if they must. A child has not had the space to learn.

Cyrion hesitated. He turned about, and strolled back towards the steps of the palace, and softly up the steps.

"One last thing, my friend, the prince," he called to Memled.

"What is that?"

Cyrion smiled. "You were too perfect and I did not quite see it, till just now a child showed me." Cyrion swung the bag from his shoulder exactly into Memled's belly. Next second the sword flamed to Cyrion's hand, and Memled's black-winged head hopped down the stair.

Around the fire, the dancers had left off dancing. The guards were transfixed in stammering shock, though no hand flew to a blade. Cyrion wiped his own blade, this time on Memled's already trembling torso.

"That one, too," said Cyrion.

"Yes, sir," said the nearest of the guard, thickly. "There were the two of them."

"And they dined nightly over who should batten on the city, did they not, your prince-demon and his doxy. He could not avoid the prophecy, either, of a hero at the gates. He was obliged to court me, and, in any event, reckoned the lady would deal with me as with the others. But when she did not, he was content I should have killed her, if he could escape me and keep the city for himself to feed him. He rendered himself straightly. He never once uttered for his own demonic side. He acted as a man, as Memled, the prince - fear and joy. He was too good. Yet I should never have been sure but for the children's agonized blankness down there, in the crowd."

"You are undeniably a hero, and heaven will bless you," said the guard. It was easy to see he was a true human man, and the rest of them were human too. Unpredictable and bizarre was their relief at rescue, as with all true men, who do not get their parts by heart beforehand, when to cry or when to grin.

Cyrion laughed low at the glittering sky. "Then bless me. heaven."

He went down the stair again. Both children were howling now, as they had not dared do formerly, untrammelled., healthy. Cyrion opened the leather bag, and released the treasure on the square, for adults and children alike to play with.

Empty-handed, as he came, Cyrion went away into the desert, under the stars.